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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for improving writing skills through choices of structured and unstructured writing process. The purpose of this program is to increase their ability to produce quality writing as measured by the district's fourth grade writing rubric. The targeted population consisted of an average fourth grade class, located in a "sub-rural" community 60 miles north of Chicago, Illinois. The problem of low writing ability was documented through assessments of students writing samples, classroom observations, student interviews, and student questionnaires. The program implemented new strategies in the area of student choices in the usage of writing skills and processes, during the period of January 2002 to February 2002. A review of solution strategies suggested by knowledgeable others, combined with an analysis of the problem setting resulted in the selection of one major intervention. A revision of the essay writing process, as related to student skill development, took place. The classroom environment was altered to include a writing area that provided a writing tool such as graphic organizer, peer edits, thesauri and dictionaries for student use. The students were presented with a structured and unstructured writing process and given choices in the usage of the processes. In conclusion the program proved to be successful in several aspects of the writing process. The students have a positive attitude and have developed a new style of writing that is less structured and less intimidating. They continued to use outside resources in the same manner and use of peer editing increased slightly. The scores obtained through the fourth grade writing rubric have increased in both from the start of the program. These results were small but positive for the targeted group. Contains 10 figures and 30 references. Appendixes contain interview questions, a questionnaire, a writing observation form, and the fourth grade writing rubric. (Author/RS)

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IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING THROUGH DIFFERENT WRITING STYLES

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School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership.

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Field-Based Masters Program

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This report describes a program for improving writing skills through choices of structured and unstructured writing process. The purpose of this program is to increase their ability to produce quality writing as measured by the district's fourth grade writing rubric. The targeted population consisted of an average fourth grade class, located in a sub-rural community 60 miles north of Chicago, Illinois. The problem of low writing ability was documented through assessments of students writing samples, classroom observations, student interviews, and student questionnaires. The program implemented new strategies in the area of student choices in the usage of writing skills and processes, during the period of January 2002 to February 2002.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT.....1

General Statement of the Problem.....1

Immediate Problem Context.....1

The Surrounding Community.....3

National Context of the Problem.....4

CHAPTER 2 – PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION.....8

Problem Evidence.....8

Probable Causes.....13

CHAPTER 3 – THE SOLUTION STRATEGY.....19

Literature Review.....19

Project Objectives and Processes.....25

Project Action Plan.....26

Methods of Assessment.....29

CHAPTER 4 – PROJECT RESULTS.....33

Historical Description of the Intervention.....33

Presentation and Analysis of Results.....35

Conclusions and Recommendations.....40

REFERENCES.....42

APPENDICES.....44

CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students of the targeted fourth grade class exhibit a lack of writing skills that interferes with their academic achievement. Evidence for the problem includes assessments of student writing samples, classroom observations, student interviews and student questionnaires.

Immediate Problem Context

The school studied was located in a sub-rural community about 60 miles north of Chicago. The school consisted of 525 students. Ethnically, the school was comprised of students that were 89.7% Caucasian, 6.1% African-American, 2.9% Mexican-American, and 0.6% Asian. A significant number of students, 9.4%, were defined as low-income. A low-income student may come from families receiving public aid, live in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, be supported in foster homes with public funds, or be eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches. The attendance rate, at 94%, was the percentage of students that attend school every day, all year. The student mobility rate, at 6.5%, was based on the number of students who enroll in or leave a school during a school year. Chronic truancy rate, at 0.2%, was defined as

students who were absent from school without valid causes for 18 or more of the last 180 school days (School Report Card, 2000).

The building was staffed by a total of 55 employees. The staff members were led by two administrators, a principal and an assistant principal. There were 32 certified teachers for kindergarten through fifth grade, with four at each grade level, eight special education teachers, and one instructor each in art, music, and physical education. The 19 uncertified staff members worked in the lunchroom, office, or as a classroom aide. The average years experience for the staff was 9.6 years. The number of teachers with a bachelor's degree was 67.3% and with a master's degree and higher degrees was 32.7% (School Report Card, 2000).

The mission statement for this school was, "...to instill in all students the knowledge necessary to thrive as life-long learners and responsible citizens, confident, cooperative and prepared to meet the challenges of the future" (W. Fredricksen, personal communication August 20, 2001). The writing curriculum in this school was stressed at the third grade level to prepare students for the Illinois Standard Achievement Tests (ISAT). However, when students in this school reached the fourth grade, they demonstrated a deficiency in grade appropriate writing skills. By examining ISAT test scores, one could see 1% of the third and fifth grade had achieved a level of academic warning, which was defined as student work showing an inconsistent command of the basic knowledge and skills. Fifty three percent of the third and 11% of fifth grade reached a level called below standards, which was explained as students' work shows basic knowledge and skills in the learning area. A total of 44% of third and 63% of fifth grade met the standards, which meant students' showed knowledge and skill in the learning area. Only 3% of third and 25% of fifth grade students exceeded standards, or showed students'

work that was outstanding and reflected comprehensive knowledge and skills in the learning area. Test results indicated the low writing abilities of incoming fourth graders (W. Fredricksen, personal communication August 20, 2001).

The fourth grade writing standards mandated the teaching of the three main essay types, persuasive, expository, and narrative. These standards were assessed by a district rubric which examined spelling, grammar, sequencing, and format.

The Surrounding Community

The small community had a population of approximately 2,857 and an estimated 1,089 families (Town Resource Guide, 2000). The ethnic breakdown was 92.9% Caucasian, 2.5% African-American, 0.1% Native American, 1.6% Asian, and 0.1% Pacific Islander. The poverty level of the community was defined as having an income below the threshold of the family. A total of 169 citizens were deemed below poverty level. The number of citizens in the community between the ages of 0-24 was 38%, from 25-54 was 51%, and 55-85 was 11% (American Fact Finder, 2000).

The community experienced a significant amount of growth between 1990 and 2000. The 1990 population was 2, 857 and by 2000 had expanded to 5,864 (Fact Finder, 2000). This was a 48% growth rate. That increase in population placed a large demand on the school system, which was forced to expand. In that ten year span, the community twice passed referendums, allowing for the construction of two new elementary schools, which brought the total number of schools in the district to five (J. Haley, personal communication, August 15, 2001).

The district office was staffed by 15 employees, 5 of which were administrators. Board meetings are held bi-monthly and open to the public. Community support for the district was

shown through the passage of referendums, the most recent of which included an increase in the building maintenance fund that raised property taxes (W. Fredericksen, personal communication, August 14, 2001). Support was given through the partnerships of Campbell's Soup and General Mills, which donate money to schools in exchange for turning in labels (M. Kidric, personal communication, August 15, 2001).

National Context of the Problem

Improvement in writing was a concern at both the national and state levels (Solomon, 2000 and Pierce, 1997). Some of the problems that occurred were unique to individual states, while more general problems overlapped into the national spotlight. Through exploration of these problems, one can more easily understand the deficits of the students' writing achievement at the research sight.

The state of Illinois reported problems in a writing program for elementary schools. The problems encountered were documented with timed writing samples, student and parent surveys, standardized test scores, and teacher observations. Analysis of the data showed that struggling writers had difficulties for many reasons. These included spelling and handwriting problems, lack of mechanical skills, little motivation, previous writing failure, and a fear of expressing emotions on paper (Pierce, 1997). Contributing factors in the classroom environment were an overloaded and product driven curriculum, inappropriate teacher training, time consuming and subjective grading processes, and student frustration (Large et al., 1997). Causes outside of school were related to time spent watching the television, playing electronic games, and lack of a parental value of literacy (Anderson, 1996). The state of Illinois' assessment tests results indicated that 44% of all incoming fourth grade students were below standards (School Report

Card, 2000). The Illinois State Board of Education allocated $3.6 million for the Even Start Family Literacy program and $6.5 million for the Title 1 program. Federal funding was also given to 16 districts that exhibited the greatest literacy needs. On May 27, 1999 Governor Jim Ryan created the Illinois Office on Literacy and the Governor's Advisory Council on Literacy to help ensure that Illinois students meet future writing standards (Illinois State Board of Education, 2001).

Other states experience similar problems. In the state of California, a decided lack of teacher training combined with little literacy in the homes of students resulted in low writing achievement (Williams, 2001). Likewise, the state of Minnesota cited a lack of teacher training and involvement as possible reasons behind struggling young writers (Pitton, 1999).

On the national level, the writing problem has been labeled as finding a way to allow children the space and time to really use their own words and then getting teachers to listen to them. The education process was viewed as controlling what children wrote and placing the emphasis on learning the various writing skills rather than exercising those skills (Hall, 2000). Additional problems included writing below grade level, being able to write but choosing not to write, frustration, and not possessing the skill to express themselves in writing (Manning, 2000). Traditional writing assignments focused only on the end purpose, rather than to foster creativity through such means as relaxed grammar, and allowing the students enjoyment of the writing process as a whole (Fouberg, 2000). Manning also looked at the problems in students who were able to write, but found their trouble in revising and publishing their work (2000).

Acceptable writing skills are important because the ability to write is a primary factor in all teaching (Solomon, 2000). Writing serves as a cornerstone of the educational process and is

used across the curriculum. Writing is necessary for the communication of ideas, explanation, self-expression, a creative outlet, and documentation of facts. Writing has been described as a kaleidoscope process because the writers' changing purpose shapes the style of their writing. The children have a variety of reasons for writing and each requires a unique style (Schneider, 2000). Writers' workshop has helped students to master the principles of the writing process. Students are made aware that writing was important. By exposing students to a variety of writing styles they gained understanding of worldly issues (Smith, 2000).

Writing has been directly connected with critical thinking and problem solving. It gives the writer an alternative means of figuring the solution to a problem. Through writing students can actively construct their own meanings of the world. Another purpose of writing was to transfer, rather than accumulate knowledge since understanding stems from application of concepts. Learning has been argued to be more meaningful when writing activities employ students to call upon prior knowledge and experiences (Fouberg, 2000). Writing allows the individual to have an opportunity for a friendly exchange of ideas such as constructive criticism, positive feedback, letter writing, and e-mail (Hall, 2000).

Students nationally and statewide are faced with an alarming number of problems in the area of writing. However, there is no denial of the correlation between good writers and successful adults. Further proof, that writing skills are essential exists in the writing of Howard Gardner, who believed that students learn to write in a variety of ways. Since children think, learn, reason, and create in different ways, teachers need to adapt their lessons to meet the needs of their pupils. According to Albert Einstein, words of the language as they are written do not seem to play a role in the process of thought; clear images can be produced and combined, while

words have to be sought for laboriously. The importance lies within the writer ability to produce the necessary words for expression (Black, 1999).

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

Although there are many types of evidence that a researcher can collect to document this problem, assessments of student writing samples, class observations, interviews, and student questionnaires are the selected evidence tools for this research. These data are presented in narrative and figure form.

In order to document the extent of student growth in the area of writing over a four week time period, a variety of tools were used. These tools include: a student interview (Appendix A) which was used to document their negative feelings on writing prior to the intervention, a questionnaire (Appendix B), an observation form which was used to assess students' pre-writing process (Appendix C), and a writing rubric which was used to assess the writing samples (Appendix D).

The interview, questionnaire, and observation were created by the researchers conducting the study. These assessment tools are valid because they are attempting to increase writing ability and measure writing effectiveness. These assessment tools are reliable because they assess each area several times in attempt to obtain reliable answers from the students. The

interview and observation were administered by the researcher who was not responsible for teaching the studied group of students. The writing rubric was assembled by the control group's school district. This assessment was given by the researcher that taught the studied group of students.

The students participating in the study particpated in a pre-interview on January 28th. Of the 24 students in the class, 16 were involved in this assessment. A summary of the students' interviews is presented in Figure 1.

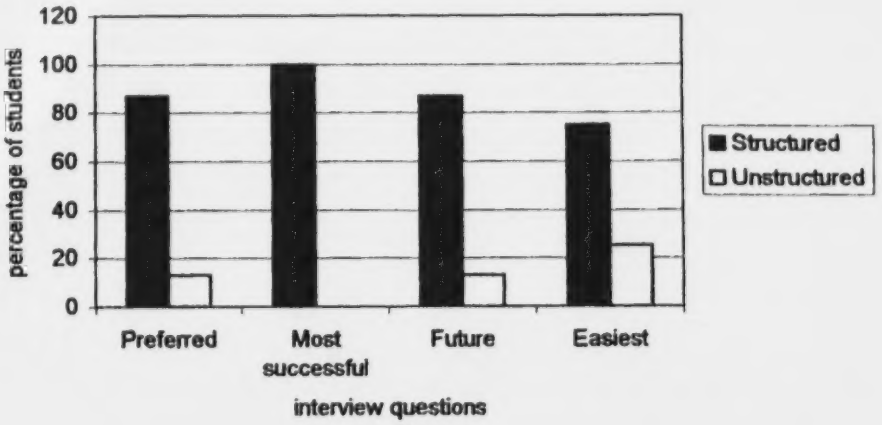

Figure 1. Results from students first interview

The 16 students participating in the study were interviewed by one of the researchers. Of these students, 87% preferred the structured writing style and 13% preferred the unstructured writing style. When looking at which style the students felt successful using 100% said that structured writing was the best choice for them. The students were also asked about the future and which writing style they would choose. Of the students interviewed, 87% responded in favor of the structured writing style and 13% favored the unstructured writing. The last set of

questions focused on which style they felt was easiest and 75% chose structured writing, while 25% chose unstructured writing.

Of the 24 students in the class, 16 were involved in this process over the four-week time period. A summary of the students' pre-questionnaires is presented in Figure 2.

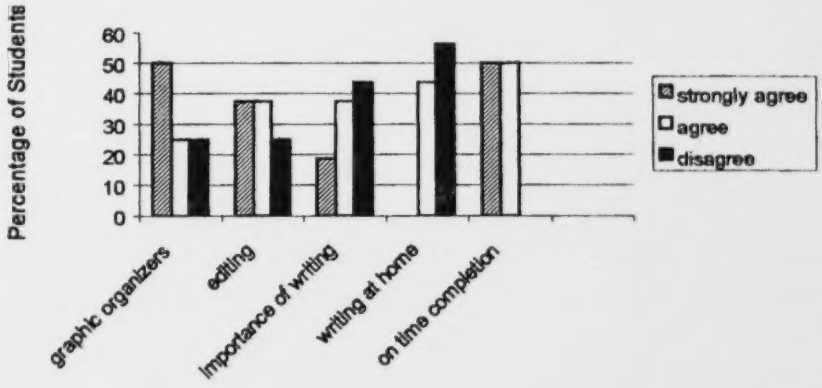

Figure 2. Results from students pre-questionnaires

Of the sixteen students participating in the study, 50% strongly agreed, 25% agreed, and 25% disagreed that graphic organizers helped their writing. About 38% of the students strongly agreed and agreed that editing their work writing was important. The remaining 24 % disagreed on the importance of editing their work. About 19% of the students strongly agreed that writing was important, while 38% agreed and 43% of the students disagreed. The writing importance at home had 0% strongly agreeing, 44% agreeing and 56% strongly disagreeing. The students responded to more positively to the idea of turning in work on time with 50% strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing.

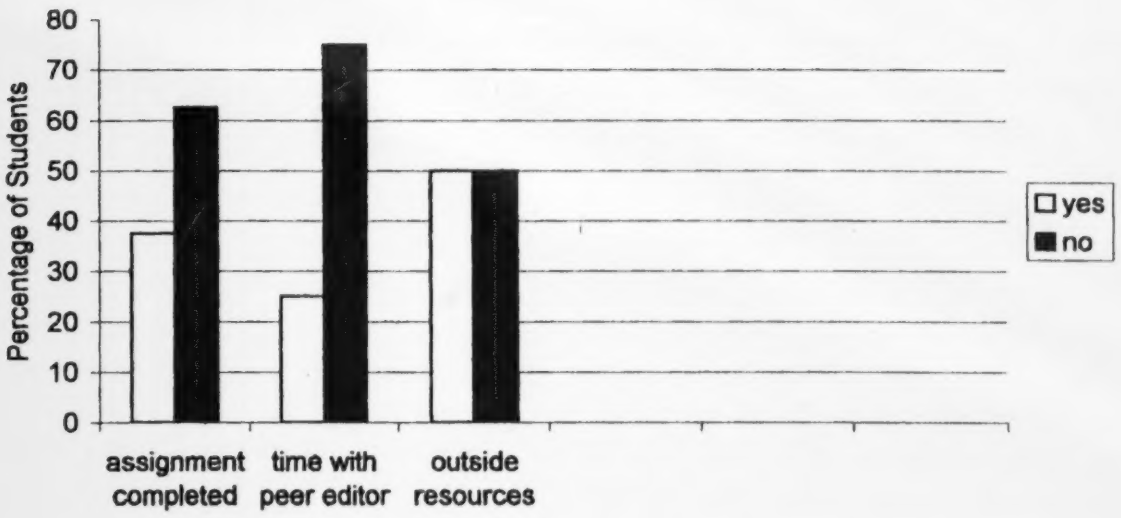

Figure 3. Pre-observation results.

The 16 students who participated in this study were given a pre-observation on January 28th. These students were observed by one researcher while the other was teaching and the results can be seen in Figure 3. The results shown in Figure 3 found that 37% of the group finished on time while the remaining 62% were late with their assignments. The second skill observed was the amount of time that the students spent working with a peer editor. During the pre-observation 25% of the students used the peer editors and 75% did not. Using outside resources such as dictionaries and thesauruses was the last objective in the lesson. The results were that 50 % of the students used other resources and 50% did not.

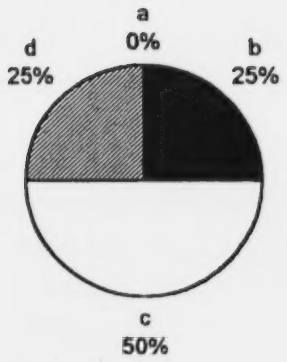

Figure 4. Structured writing style pre-essay scores as letter grades.

On January 18th, the 16 students participating in this study were scored on pre-essays by using a writing rubric (Appendix D) as seen in Figure 4. The students were asked to complete a writing sample in the beginning of the study. After scoring the writing examples with the writing rubric, the researchers found that 0% of the group achieved the grade of an A, 25% with a B, 50% with a C, and 25% with a D.

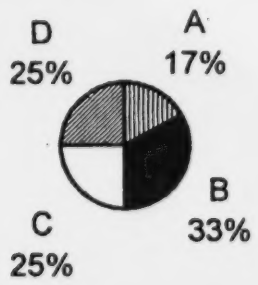

Figure 5. Unstructured writing style pre-essay scores as letter grades.

On January 18th the 16 students participating in this study were scored on pre-essays by using a rubric (Appendix D) as seen in Figure 5. The students were asked to complete a writing sample in the beginning of the study. After scoring the writing samples with the writing rubric, the researchers found that 25% of the students received a B, 50% of the students received a C, and 25% scored a D. The problem evidence illustrates that the students had difficulty with the writing assignment.

In conclusion the problem evidence reveals that the students in the studied group were exhibiting problems in the area of writing. The student's attitudes and moral were low. When observed the use of appropriate pre-writing skills were seldom present. The writing samples were assessed and illustrated these problems.

Probable Causes

The lack of fourth grade writing skills can be directly attributed to a combination of school and literature based problems. The school-based problems include a lack of writing in the home, poor teacher training, and the absence of a consistent writing process. The literature based problems include a product driven curriculum, too much time spent on grammar and mechanics, lack of student choice and interest, and students' fear of exposing their feelings.

There are many reasons for the absence of writing in the home. Many parents do not have enough time at home to spend working on writing with their child. English as a Second Language students are at a particular disadvantage because they generally speak and write in their native language at home rather than in English, and their parents cannot provide assistance when their children write in English. Many parents fail to model writing in the home and therefore students feel that very little value is placed on writing. Not all students have access to

such important writing materials as dictionaries and thesauruses. Another reason for little writing in the home is that it frequently takes a back seat to such activities as watching television and playing video games. Students also lack exposure to writing through reading. Those that are not read to or do not read themselves will not have experienced quality writing (Anderson, 1996).

Poor teacher training contributes heavily to the writing problem. One cause of poor teacher training is a lack of experience. Teachers new to the profession bring new and or different ideas on how writing should be taught. In addition, they also have little or no formal training on how to teach this critical subject. Teachers are required to take very few courses in the field of writing and this works to limit the effectiveness of their teaching. Instructors that lack experience subsequently lack the knowledge necessary to capably teach writing. Many school districts lack the funding for courses that would improve writing instruction. Another cause of poor teacher training is high teacher turnover rate. New teachers enter the district with little or no district training. New teachers also bring different writing programs, which are not aligned with what other teachers are implementing. The absence of teacher instruction in the area of writing leads new teachers to lack the necessary confidence for teaching writing (Large et al. 1997). New teachers consistently enter the field without the essential background knowledge of how to teach spelling, grammar, and the mechanics of writing (Pierce, 1997).

The lack of a consistent writing process limits the fourth grade writing skills. By changing programs from the house frame approach to the detailed writing approach students have had to relearn the way they write. The house frame method stressed the mechanics of writing, while the detailed approach requires students to use more details in order to add depth to

their writing. When new teachers try to teach new writing programs that they themselves do not grasp fully, the students writing skills are jeopardized. The variation in teaching styles and instructional techniques is also partly responsible for the diminished writing consistency. Teachers can opt for structured, unstructured, direct, small group, inquiry based, and problem based methods of instruction. Different standards among previous teachers are another example of the absence of consistency in the writing program. Inconsistent grading scales among teachers, inconsistent grading scales across grade levels, and overlapping curriculums are contributing causes to the writing problem.

The first literature based problem is that the new product driven curriculum adds to the writing struggles. With the focus on standardized test scores, which have no effect on the students, schools are forced to teach to the test. The daily imperative becomes to work on practice exercises. These include daily oral language activities, grammar workbooks, and other preparatory test exercises. The writing focus shifts further away from writing for pleasure (Smith, 2000). The pendulum also swings from the content to the process. Writing instruction, centers on brainstorming, webbing, pre-writing, editing, final drafts, and publishing (Smith, 2002) are all elements of the writing process that so many of our students are forced to use.

The problem of curriculum is growing from the movement that has been focusing on teaching the state standards and goals. The current educational system has changed its curriculum to match the standards that the state governments have put into place. The quality and content of the standards and curriculum have been questioned by many because of the lack of teacher involvement when the standards are written (Pitton, 1999).

Schools have placed an enormous amount of pressure upon the achievement of standardized test scores. School districts and the state government have turned the focus of learning in a more competitive direction. Writing is taught from a new, focused approach, where organized paragraphs and essays begin to sound the same from student to student. The element of enjoyment has been lost to ensure that test scores improve and districts appear successful. The students are given tools to pass a standardized test, but are not taught to find pleasure in writing.

With large amounts of writing time devoted to grammar and mechanics, it is not surprising that overall writing skills are suffering. Student interest in the mechanics of writing and grammar skills, which are coupled with time consuming practice exercises, can only be described as low (Hall, 2000). Students fail to incorporate and transition these skills into their everyday writing and real life usage. Students feel that grammar and mechanics are situational and are performed separate from the writing process. There is also a sense that these skills are somewhat arbitrary and will not always be interpreted the same. Many young writers lack confidence when using the mechanics of writing, which suggests that ample time has not been spent using these skills in their writing (Pierce, 1997).

One aspect of writing that is often overlooked is free writing, which is important in providing students the opportunity to express themselves. This is also a part of writing that students enjoy. The school day is extremely busy; teachers have a deadline to follow, and one of the first things that is cut when short for time is free writing. The daily schedule rarely allows for this type of expression, which includes such types of writing as journal writing, poetry, and

letter writing. The quarterly deadline to assess students, forces teachers to focus on various writing assignments, so they can be evaluated (Hall, 2000).

The lack of student choice is a probable cause of the writing problem in the elementary school. The reason for this problem stems from the curriculum, student interests, and the focus on achieving standardized test scores.

The lack of student interest branches from the problem of a dull and unmotivating curriculum. In this fast paced society filled with intense media, the students need more than a textbook to keep their interest. The curriculum and resources need to change with the time and student interest. Variation in assignments and curriculum will help keep topics interesting and writing styles unique (Pierce, 1997).

Reluctant writers also find failure when writing because of an underlying fear. The fear of failure stems from low self-esteem in other subject areas or even personal esteem issues outside the classroom. Failure can also haunt individuals that are good students, but because of this fear of failure, many young writers never take a risk. In addition, some students fear writing because they write at lower levels than their fellow students and because they do not possess the skills to express themselves in writing (Manning, 2000).

In summary, the evidence sited showed that students preferred the structured writing format over unstructured writing. This included the 50 % that felt strongly about using graphic organizers to begin their writing assignments. According to the questionnaire the students showed a poor attitude toward the importance of writing in general and at home. The result of the observation revealed that 60% of the students felt it unnecessary to finish and turn in assignments on time and 75% of the students did not feel a need to use a peer editor. The final

assessment, the writing rubric, assessed the students pre-writing samples. These prewriting samples and rubrics illustrated that the majority of the students have not mastered the skills of writing. Therefore the evidence from the pre-assessments and the literature present the need for implementing a writing intervention.

CHAPTER 3

Literature Review

In the research about the lack of writing skills that interfere with students' academic achievement, three solutions surfaced. These solutions are: altering curriculum through placing greater emphasis on the writing strategies, starting a home writing program, and providing students with new strategies for improving writing skills. Within the solution of implementing new writing strategies were methods that incorporate process drama, webs, mental movies, favorite authors, prompts, dialogues, and interactive writing.

The writing curriculum can be altered by implementing the notion of writing across the curriculum. The "Read to Write" program places substantial emphasis upon improving writing and the five steps of the writing process. The first step, prewriting, involves brainstorming ideas about a topic. Step two is the rough copy, in which a rough draft is written. The third step, editing, involves both teacher and peer editing the rough copy and providing corrections of spelling and grammar. The fourth step, revising, requires a second draft with all mistakes corrected after editing. The final step is publishing, in which the student prepares the work so it may be submitted to be published (Butler & Crowell, 2001).

The project approach improves the curriculum by making use of themes, units, and projects that incorporate writing across each of the subject areas. Project work is not used in addition to the curriculum, but rather as an integral aspect of it because it includes so many different academic areas. Projects, themes, and units allow learners to gather and record information about a specific topic and from there, construct reports based on that material. This approach has been successful at the elementary level and continues to grow based on recent research in the area of how children learn (Katz, 1984).

Another curricular solution is the writing workshop wherein the students are able to focus on specific skills. The skill depends on the focus of the lesson that has been planned for that workshop. The emphasis is placed on the writing process, which in turn helps the students to master the mechanics of writing. Daily writing on continuously clever new topics encourages students to write on there own and even to begin new pieces. Writing on a daily basis conveys the message that writing is important. The term "writer's workshop" encourages written expression by providing an environment that is safe, secure, and predictable. Writing, being such a risky and challenging endeavor, can become a wonderful opportunity for expression and communication (Smith, 2000).

The writing curriculum can also be altered through immersing the students in print. Students immersed in a print rich environment are likely to be interested in both reading and writing. Large, et al., (1997) found that "by providing exploratory opportunities for the students, they will improve their own writing and begin to enjoy the process of writing" (p. 18). In order for this to be successful, teachers must provide their students with as many forms of the printed word as are possible. These forms of writing are anything that contains writing, including

directions, recipes, magazines, newspapers, and reading computer games. In addition to various forms, teachers should also offer a virtual plethora of literature to their students. The theory behind this approach is that by reading quality material, students will gain an understanding of quality writing and its various styles (Large, et al., 1997).

Another writing strategy that will better students' writing proficiency is the introduction of a home writing program. The home writing program encourages students to experiment with a variety of writing styles outside of school and begins during the first few years of elementary school. The focus turns to the creativity and enjoyment that students derive from writing. A program like this is established by dedicated parents that encourage children to express themselves through journal writing, letter writing, or even writing a story rather than reading one that is already published. Through this program students begin to experience success with writing, which causes them to seek out and relish opportunities to express themselves literally and to become successful writers (Large, et al., 1997).

Improving writing skills is a critical component to improving writing. This means that students will need a solid foundation built upon a full understanding of grammar, sentence structure, and spelling principles. This foundation needs to begin construction in the early grades and be added upon in succeeding years. Skill development should be presented to students in a variety of ways in order to capture the audience rather than turn them off to the fundamentals of writing. Many teachers approach this topic in a very repetitive style using worksheets and a drill based technique. The creative teacher may use games, cooperative learning, peer editing, and anything but the ordinary to address such a vital skill. Students should view this process both as

unique and necessary and should begin to take ownership of their own writing and seek to better themselves (Large, et al., 1997).

The writing strategy of process drama involves a great deal of imagination. The students use prompts to take them to a scene where they can write scripts and create mental images based on the curricular topics, teacher objectives, and personal experiences made by the student. Students are able to visualize their experiences because they externalize the mental images. Process drama also allows the students to use language, movement, and visualization to express themselves (Schneider & Jasinski, 2000).

Webbing is a writing strategy used before the students begin writing a particular piece. There are several types of graphic organizers that are used to organize their thoughts prior to writing. The web encourages the student to write a topic sentence, supporting details, and establish paragraphs (Sultan, 2000).

Making a mental movie is a process that focuses on elaboration and details. The students visualize a story in their minds before beginning writing. This visual aspect helps the students to see the details of their writing before putting it into words. This transfer of pictures to words may be helpful for the visual learner (Sultan, 2000).

By using the works of famous authors one can get students interested in writing. Students can examine the means by which their favorite authors have been successful and model these styles and techniques. Using the students' favorite authors allows the teacher to study the different writing methods and hold the students' attention (Sultan, 2000).

Writing prompts have been used for many years, but continue to be used on assessments and in the classroom. A writing prompt is a story starter that can help writers to begin working

on a specific assignment. Prompts can be presented in the form of a question that the writer must answer, or an open ended sentence which needs to be completed (Sultan, 2000).

The technique of using dialogue is more commonly implemented in the upper elementary grades. Students at this level are encouraged to use dialogue because it will help keep the action of the story moving. By having characters converse, the action of the story will appear to flow more naturally and quickly. This sense of flow will serve to hold the readers' attention (Sultan, 2000).

Many students will not learn a skill or practice a skill unless there is a given reason, which leads one to problem based writing. Hall (2000) found that "the students are given a problem to solve; as they figure out the problem they are learning valuable, real life skills" (p. 361). With problem based writing, students would not only be expected to solve the problem, but then write about the problem and their efforts. What many do not realize is that their efforts to solve a problem may include writing a letter, sending an e-mail, researching a topic, or possibly some other means of communication (Hall, 2000).

Interactive writing is a type of writing that allows students the time and space to use their own words. The teacher then listens to their writing. Interactive writing involves the participation of two or more people who will exchange meaningful and purposeful subject area conversations over an extended period of time. When it works, there is a bond that is created between correspondents. This bond needs to be mutual for this style of writing to be effective. The dialogue gains an added dimension as the frequency of the contributions increases. Interactive writing can take many forms. The easiest form is letter writing. Students can use the

flexibility of the letter writing format to communicate in many ways. In a letter it is conceivable for one to argue, reflect, inform, instruct, and relate (Hall, 2000).

Students' motivation to write will be increased through the inclusion of required and free writing. In addition to essay writing, students should be involved in writer's workshops, which allow students to master the key principles of writing as well as to improve their feelings and attitudes about writing. This tactic can be used in conjunction with a myriad of writing styles. Journal writing also helps to motivate student writing. By allowing students to occasionally choose their own topics and styles, they will look forward to and enjoy writing (Smith, 2000).

Novel writing can be useful in attempts to inspire students' writing. Writing skills such as thinking, planning, organizing, research, and composition can be taught through the creation of a class novel. This project also allows students to take ownership of their writing, which is a significant factor in motivating young writers (Solomon, 2000).

Cooperative writing is another useful writing method that helps to improve student motivation. This tool can also be used to increase production, skill, and confidence through a variety of different writing activities. Teachers, parents, and peers can all witness the dividends of cooperative writing through the genuine enthusiasm exhibited on a daily basis by the students (Pierce et al. 1997).

Another factor in raising the motivation level of students toward writing is the climate of the classroom. The classroom environment should illustrate the teachers' encouragement and acceptance of risk-taking, innovation, uniqueness, and freedom. Students also need to have a lengthy allotment of time in order to explore and do their best writing. In addition, the classroom should inspire students to write and be filled with natural light and color. Examples of literary

greatness should serve to challenge students to do their best work. The environment should provide a variety of materials for students to write with. The climate as well as time, space, and materials play key roles in motivating youthful writers (Edwards & Springate, 1995).

In conclusion, the literature that was reviewed presented a number of solutions that would significantly improve the existing writing problem. Teacher training could be improved by having teachers attend training workshops with a focus on writing. A home writing program could be initiated and would increase students' writing ability. Another solution that was recommended called for teachers to provide new writing strategies to the students that would help to improve their writing skills. These strategies involved developing discussion topics, adapting graphic organizers, and establishing a reference center complete with dictionaries, encyclopedias, and a thesaurus. The literature also suggested altering the curriculum with a greater emphasis on placed on the writing strategies. This would result in teachers researching supplemental materials for student use and providing a writing rubric for the students prior to beginning the writing process. These alterations suggest a shift from a traditional language arts approach, with a focus on the parts of speech, diagramming sentences, and proper grammar, to a program focused almost exclusively on writing and the writing process.

Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of altering the curriculum through placing greater emphasis on the writing strategies of the structured and unstructured processes and providing students with new strategies and additional resources for improving writing skills, during the period of January 2002 to February

2002, the fourth grade students from the targeted class will increase their ability to produce quality writing as measured by the district grading rubric.

In order to accomplish the project objective, the following processes are necessary:

1. Review basic writing skills such as: sentence structure, punctuation, and grammar
2. Teach elements of a paragraph: main idea and supporting details
3. Model and teach transition words used to link paragraphs
4. Adapt graphic organizer to topics
5. Create a checklist for peer editing
6. Establish a reference center complete with dictionaries, encyclopedias, and a thesaurus
7. Make writing rubric available

Project Action Plan

The following Project Action Plan will consist of two parts. Term one will begin with teaching the student writing by using a method of practice that is very structured. The students will use graphic organizers and peer editing skills. The students will be expected to have a rough and final copy before their assignment is complete. This structured method of teaching and learning how to write is done for two weeks before the second term is implemented.

The second term is an unstructured method of teaching writing allowing the students to write freely without forcing the elements of prewriting, rough copies, peer editing and final copies. This style of teaching presents the assignment, the expectations, and the time line in which the assignment need to be completed, but then allows the students to work freely. At the same time all the writing tools such as graphic organizers, peer edits, and dictionaries are

available to the students. After two lessons taught in this manner the class is interviewed regarding their preference and their writing piece from each method are assessed.

January 7-11, 2001

-Prior to beginning the project, place a class set of dictionaries and thesauruses in the classroom (if a classroom set is not feasible five dictionaries and five thesauruses will do)

-Find three different versions of Cinderella

-Find My Life With a Wave

January 14, 2001 Begin Term One (Structured)

-Begin by reading three different versions of Cinderella.

-Discuss the differences in these tales.

-The students will also be reading fairy tales during reading so they will have an understanding of the different parts of a fairy tale.

-Students will complete a graphic organizer for their own fairy tale. (Appendix E)

January 15, 2001

-Students will write their rough copies by using their graphic organizers.

January 16, 2001

-Review editing skills.

-Students will need to have two peer edits.

January 17, 2001

-Edit their rough copies.

-Write their final copies of fairy tales.

January 18, 2001

-Finish final copies of fairy tales.

-Students will answer questions from a questionnaire. (Appendix B)

-Students' essays will be graded using the district rubric. (Appendix D)

January 21, 2001

-As a class, brainstorm the pros and cons of winter.

-Students will complete a graphic organizer including reasons for why winter is either the best or worst season. (Appendix E)

January 22, 2001

-Students will begin their rough draft using their graphic organizer.

January 23, 2001

-Review peer editing.

-Students will need to have two peer edits.

-Students will be observed.

January 24, 2001

-Write final copies of winter essays.

January 28, 2001 Begin Term Two (Unstructured)

-Read My Life With a Wave.

-Discuss story.

-Make graphic organizers and peer editing tools available. (Appendix E)

-The students will be interviewed about their writing and the writing styles. (Appendix A)

-An observation will be given to evaluate the use of writing tools by the students. (Appendix C)

January 29-31 2001

-Have students write a sequel to the story about their life with a wave

February 1, 2001

-Write final copies of their life with a wave essays.

February 4, 2001

-Discuss Presidents day and significant Presidents and their accomplishments.

-Make graphic organizers and peer editing tools available to the students. (Appendix E)

-An observation will be given to evaluate the use of writing tools by the students. (Appendix C)

February 5-7, 2001

-Have students write what they would do if they were President.

February 8, 2001

-Students' essays will be graded using the district rubric. (Appendix D)

-Students will answer questions from a questionnaire. (Appendix B)

February 11-15, 2001

-The students will be interviewed about their writing and the writing styles. (Appendix A)

-Analyze intervention results.

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, a questionnaire will be developed. The questionnaire will ask the students about their feelings toward writing and the different writing styles. In addition, observations will be performed to assess the students' response to the intervention. Interviews will be administered prior to and upon completion of the research

project. A district-approved rubric will also be used to assess the students' writing during the intervention.

The subject size is 24 fourth grade students in a general fourth grade class. This measurement will be give individually to sixteen randomly selected students. Students' names will be drawn from a hat. One researcher will be giving the interview to measure writing styles (Appendix A); outside the classroom while the other researcher will be giving instruction to the class. The interview will be administered after both writing styles have been taught. The first interview will be given on January 28, 2001 and the second one on February 11, 2001. The interview will be given by a teacher outside the classroom. Responses will be recorded on paper by the researcher.

The instrument being used is a series of questions that evaluates student interests and preference in writing styles. This interview is valid because the researchers are attempting to increase writing ability and this interview clearly measures writing method effectiveness. By interviewing sixteen randomly selected students there is a representation of the class. The questions on the interview cover the style, preference, and successfulness of the fourth graders involved. They are asked several questions that are rephrased to insure the reliability of the answers. All students will be coded to keep identity concealed. In place of names letters will be given to each student interviewed.

A questionnaire will be used to measure writing styles. (Appendix B) The subject size is 24 fourth grade students in a general fourth grade class. This measurement will be given to the entire class at one time. The questionnaire will be given two different times. The first questionnaire will be given on January 18, 2001. The second questionnaire will be given on

February 8, 2001. The questionnaire will be administered before and after the writing styles have been taught. The questionnaire will be given by the classroom teacher during class. The students will be informed that the questionnaire is being used for the teacher's research on writing styles. (Appendix B)

The instrument being used is a series of statements that allow the students to rate their interest, preference, and success in writing. This questionnaire is valid because the researchers are attempting to increase writing ability and this questionnaire clearly measures writing method effectiveness. The statements on the questionnaire cover the style, preference, and successfulness of the fourth graders involved. They are rephrased to insure the reliability of the ratings. All students will be coded to keep identity concealed. Names will not be used on the questionnaire.

An observation form is used to measure writing styles. (Appendix C) The subject size is 24 fourth grade students in a general fourth grade class. This measurement will be given to the entire class at one time. The observation will be given two different times the first on January 28, 2001, and the second on February 4, 2001. The observations will be administered while the students are being taught each of the writing styles. The observation will be completed by one researcher while the other researcher is teaching the class.

The data collected will show how much time is spent peer editing, using other resources such as dictionaries, and the amount of time spent working on the writing assignment. This will demonstrate their interest preference and their success in writing. The method of data collection is not intrusive because the researcher will not participate in the class. Observations are low inference and the researchers are looking for specific behavior.

A rubric is used to measure writing success. (Appendix D) The subject size is 24 fourth grade students in a general fourth grade class. This measurement will be given individually to the entire class. The rubric will be administered after both writing styles have been taught. The rubric will be implemented on January 18 and February 8, 2001. The assignments are five paragraph essays on a fairy tales, a creative writing assignment, winter, and American Presidents. The instrument being used is an assessment tool used district wide to evaluate fourth grade writing. This is valid because the researchers are attempting to increase writing ability.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase the targeted students' ability to use writing skills and processes in writing, as measured by the school district's writing rubric. The researchers conducted the project between January and February 2002. On January 28th the researchers interviewed (Appendix A) and observed (Appendix C) the targeted students. On January 18th the targeted students completed a questionnaire (Appendix B) in order to discover their writing habits, preferences, and tendencies. The writing samples were assessed on January 18th by a rubric (Appendix D). The students were extremely interested in this project and genuinely enjoyed the interviews and questionnaires.

The researchers first reviewed basic writing skills, which included sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation. This was accomplished through a variety of daily practice exercises, each one focusing on an individual writing skill. The researchers then taught the elements of a paragraph, such as topic sentences and supporting details, through modeling and guided practice. Finally, the researchers modeled and taught transition words, so that the students would be able to successfully link paragraphs within an essay.

After reviewing the basic writing skills the researchers proceeded to adapt a graphic organizer to each of the essay topics that the students would encounter. The organizer that they settled on was a "house frame" model (Appendix E). This device was selected because it was the most helpful in organizing the students' ideas into paragraphs. The students then completed their first term, structured winter and fairy tale essays. The researchers adhered to the action plan as closely as possible. Each student had five class periods, one per day, to complete each of the essays in sequence, according to the project's lesson plans (Appendix G). The students enjoyed being part of a research project, and their level of excitement remained high throughout the second and third weeks.

The researchers next created a checklist for peer editing (Appendix F). This checklist provided all of the students with a visual reminder of which elements they needed to check within each essay. A reference center was established within the classroom so that the students would have dictionaries, encyclopedias, and a thesaurus at their convenience. This was perceived as a useful idea because the researchers felt that students would be more likely to use reference materials if these were conveniently located within the room, rather than if the students had to search for them. The students liked the idea of getting to move around and go to the reference center during the writing process. In addition, the writing rubric (Appendix D) was made available to the students prior to beginning the writing process so that they would be informed as to what they needed to include within the paper in order to receive the highest possible score.

After presenting the students with the structured writing style the researchers allowed the students to determine for themselves which writing tools they should implement during the

second, unstructured term of the research project. The students chose for themselves whether or not to make use of graphic organizers, peer editors, and reference materials. The students used this unstructured format to complete the creative writing and presidential essays during the third and fourth weeks of the intervention. Despite initial interest in the unstructured writing style, the students began to act disinterested towards the writing and appeared to be exhausted from the heavy writing workload.

The researchers also assessed the students during the latter part of the second, unstructured term. On February 4th, the researchers observed (Appendix C) the targeted students. On February 8th, the students completed a questionnaire (Appendix B) in order to discover their writing habits, preferences, and tendencies. The writing samples were also assessed February 8th by a rubric (Appendix D). On February 11th, the researchers interviewed (Appendix A) the students about their writing and the writing styles.

In conclusion, the improving students' writing and writing processes project was implemented from January to February of 2002. The researchers obtained information through a series of student interviews, questionnaires, observations, and by assessing four different writing samples. This data was collected before, during, and after the implementation of this project.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In attempt to document the growth of the students in the area of writing over the four week time period, several tools were used. These tools included a writing rubric used to assess each writing sample (Appendix D). The post observation form was used to assess each student's prewriting pre-writing process (Appendix C). The students also completed a questionnaire

(Appendix B) and participated in an interview (Appendix A), to document their feelings on writing. All of these measurements were taken before and after the intervention.

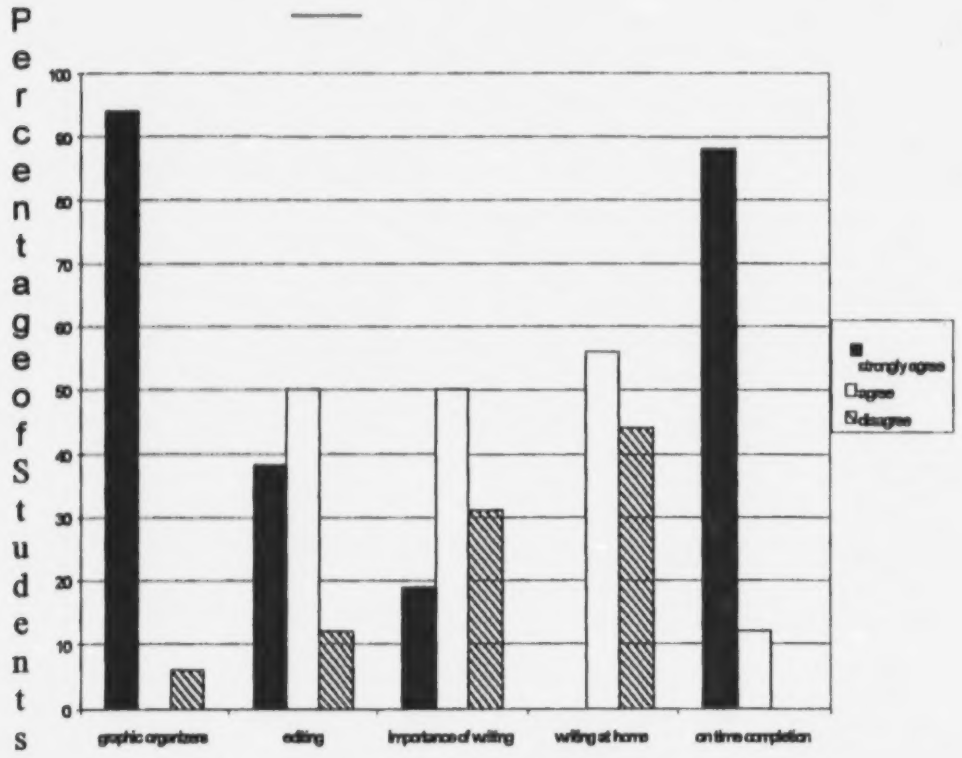

Figure 6. Results from student post-questionnaire

A second questionnaire was given to the students at the conclusion of the research project and the results can be seen in Figure 6. Of the sixteen students surveyed, 94% felt that graphic organizers helped their writing. A total of 38% strongly agreed on the importance of peer editing. The students that felt peer editing was not important decreased to 12%. The importance of writing did not change favorably with only 19% strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing. Only slightly more students indicated that writing at home was important. This 56% of the group

agreed while the other 44% disagreed. A positive change in completion time is seen with 88% of the studied group agreeing.

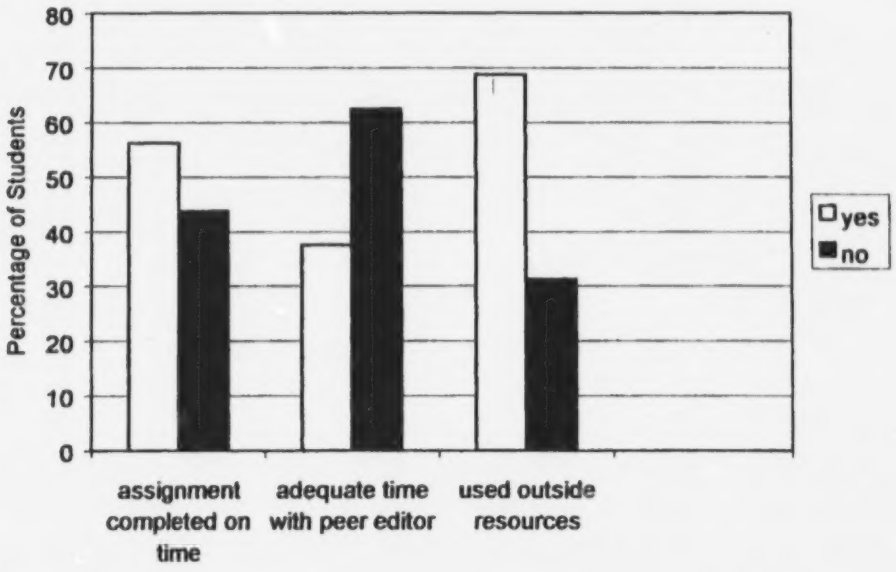

Figure 7. Post-observation results

The 16 students that took place in this study were observed at the end of the research project, by a researcher and the results can be seen in Figure 7. The results found that 56% of the group finished on time while the remaining 44% were considered late with their assignment. The second skill observed was the amount of time that the students spent working with a peer editor. During the first observation 38% of the students used the peer editors. Using outside resources such as dictionaries and thesauruses was the last objective in the lesson. The results show that 69% of the students used other resources.

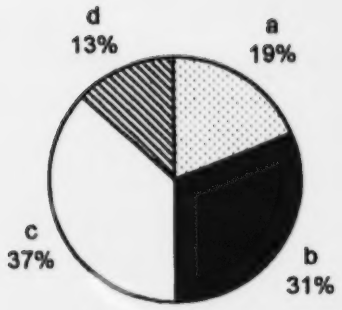

Figure 8. Structured writing style post-essay scores

The 16 students that took part in this study were scored using a writing rubric (Appendix D) as seen in Figure 8. During the four-week time period two structured writing samples were produced. The last of these writing samples shows the improvement that the students have made. A total of 31% scored high enough to achieve an A, 19% received a B, and 37% obtained the grade of a C. The smallest group of students, that included 13% of the class, earned the grade of a D.

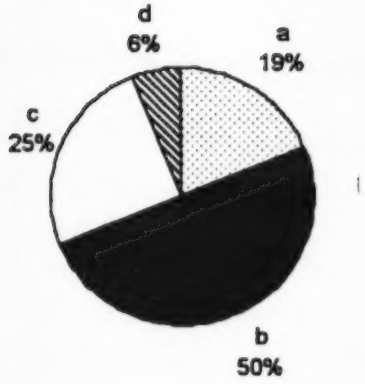

Figure 9. Unstructured writing style post-essay scores

The 16 students that took part in this study were scored using a writing rubric (Appendix D) as seen in Figure 9. During the four-week time period two unstructured writing samples were produced. The last of these writing samples shows the improvement that the students have made. A total of 19% scored high enough to receive an A, 25% received a B, and 50% obtained a C. The smallest group of students, which included 6% of the class, received a D.

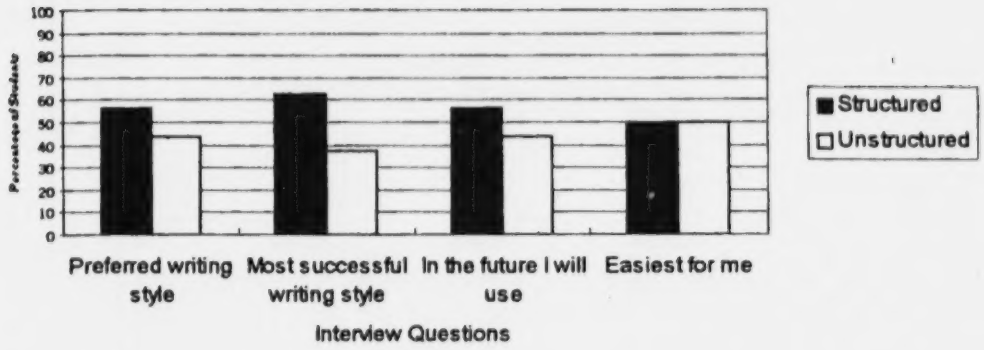

Figure 10. Second student interview

A second interview was given at the end of the research project and the results can be seen in Figure 10. Of the 16 students interviewed, 56% preferred the structured style of writing. The number of students that preferred the unstructured method of writing increased by 31% from the first interview. The results of the study indicated that only 63% of the students maintained the structured writing style to be their most successful. The study also showed that 56% of the students plan to use the structured writing style in the future, while 44% intend to use the unstructured writing style. The students found the structured and unstructured techniques to be equally easy to use.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this project, researchers sought to increase the targeted students' writing skills and processes in writing, as measured by the school district's writing rubric. The researchers examined whether the structured writing style or unstructured writing style was most effective for the students. The researchers attempted this intervention by reviewing basic writing skills, teaching the elements of a paragraph, and teaching and modeling transition words. The

researchers also adapted graphic organizers to the students' writing topics, created a checklist for peer editing, established a reference center, and made writing rubrics available to the students.

Based on the analysis of the data, gathered during the project, student writing scores improved with both writing styles. The structured writing style was slightly more effective for the students than the unstructured writing style. In addition to the writing scores, the students' understanding and usage of writing processes like peer editing and use of references increased. These findings indicated that the research project was successful.

Educators attempting to recreate this intervention may want to consider increasing the amount of time for the project. The researchers felt that more time would allow for a more successful evaluation of student writing and the writing processes. With the addition of a few more weeks, the assignments could be more spread out and by doing so reduce any pressure on the students to complete assignments. By doing this it may be possible for the students to maintain their level of enthusiasm throughout the intervention.

The researchers also suggest that educators attempt to select writing topics of high interest for the students throughout the project. By doing so, the students' interest in the writing would remain piqued. In addition, the researchers felt that it may be helpful to keep the students on a regular writing schedule for the first, structured term of the intervention. This would lead students to associate Mondays with completing graphic organizers, Tuesdays with writing rough drafts, and so on with the rest of the essay writing process.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview

Interview

1. Which style of writing did you like best?

   Why?

2. What didn't you like about the style that wasn't your favorite?

3. Which were you most successful with?

4. What style of writing did you prefer using, structured or unstructured?

5. In the future what method will you choose?

   Why?

6. Which style was the easiest to use?

Appendix B

Questionnaire

Questionnaire

1. I think writing everyday is important.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

2. I spend a lot of time at home writing.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

3. I keep a daily journal.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

4. My writing is most successful when I have a peer edit.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

5. My writing is most successful when I have a house frame.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

6. I think it is important to turn writing assignments in on time.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

7. Graphic organizers are useful in keeping my thoughts organized.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

8. Peer editing is helpful in improving my writing.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

9. House frames are useful to organize my ideas before I write.

1	2	3
strongly agree	agree	disagree

Appendix C

Writing Observation Form

Writing Observation Form

- Was the assignment turned in on time?

- How much time did the student spend on completion?

- Did the students use peer editors?

- How much time was spent with peer editors?

- How many students used a dictionary or thesaurus?

- How many showed negative behavior toward the writing assignment?

- How often were the students on task?

Appendix D

Fourth Grade Writing Rubric

FOURTH GRADE WRITING RUBRIC

Writing Element	4	3	2	1
Focus	Main idea is stated, supported, and maintained with a closing	Main idea is clear, but only partially supported	Main idea is stated, but not supported	No stated main idea
Organization	Writing has a clear beginning, middle and end with all events in correct sequence	Writing has a clear beginning and end with most events present and in order	Writing has a clear beginning with events out of sequence or missing	Writing has a clear beginning, middle, or end
Spelling	About 95% of the words in the piece are spelled correctly	About 85% of the words in the piece are spelled correctly	About 75% of the words in the piece are spelled correctly	Less that 75% of the words in the piece are spelled correctly
Mechanics	Uses mostly correct capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and writes in complete sentences	Uses mostly correct capitalization, punctuation, in complete sentences with some errors in paragraphing	Uses some correct capitalization and punctuation with some incomplete sentences and little paragraphing	Many errors in capitalization and punctuation with many incomplete sentences and little paragraphing
Word Choice	Uses many adjectives and adverbs to develop thorough and interesting descriptions and shows consistent subject-verb agreement	Uses some adjectives and adverbs, and shows consistent subject-verb agreement	Uses some adjectives and adverbs with some errors in subject-verb agreement	Uses few adjectives and adverbs with many errors in subject-verb agreement

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